

During the time of a disaster, you may have had the opportunity to save a person's life or you may have helped to provide food, clothing, and shelter. Now that you are helping to clean up or rebuild, please don't forget the emotional needs that people have after disasters.

A PERSON MAY HAVE...

... **a need to talk about the disaster.** He or she may want to tell what happened again and again. Even if you are a perfect stranger, a disaster victim may be eager to tell you all about what he or she went through. Children may be drawing pictures of the event or even acting it out in their play. Adults often have photographs of the devastation to show.

... **upset feelings or no feelings at all.** Some become fearful and nervous. Others get angry. Still others become depressed. Most people, however, have a mixture of reactions. Someone may be jittery at first, then may start crying over nothing, and then may take out his or her frustrations on an easy target - YOU! Or the person may seem not to care about anything at all. It's as if the person is emotionally numb and feels nothing.

... **trouble thinking clearly.** A person affected by a disaster may be confused, dazed, or forgetful, and may even deny the problems he or she is facing. Some plague themselves about thoughts of what they should have done differently. Others constantly ask themselves, "Why me?"

... **vivid memories of the disaster.** The person probably can picture in his or her mind detailed scenes from the disaster. Many different sights, sounds, or smells can trigger these memories.

... **nightmares and trouble sleeping.** Unfortunately, at times when a person needs sleep the most, he or she may have problems falling asleep and staying asleep.

... **a need to rely on other people.** After a disaster, a person usually wants and needs the companionship and support of other people. The person may be more dependent and rely on others to make his or her decisions.

... **worries and fears when conditions are similar to those preceding the disaster.** When the person sees a few raindrops or the wind begins to blow again, or storm warnings are posted, he or she may become nervous.

... **a need to take action.** Most persons affected want to do something - anything - *right now!* Even when nothing can be done at the moment, the person may be pacing, or rocking, or fidgeting aimlessly. Others may be so discouraged by the overwhelming job of rebuilding that they do nothing.

... **physical problems.** The person may suffer from headaches, stomach aches, nausea, and fatigue.

These are just some of the common and usually temporary reactions a person experiencing the disaster. *Keep in mind that they are normal responses to abnormal circumstances.* Fortunately, there are some simple steps you can take to help someone through these difficult times.

You can offer emotional First Aid by...

... **being with the persons affected.** Your first step is often to reach out to the person, because many are reluctant to impose on others. Often long-term needs, whether physical, spiritual, or emotional, remain unmet because the persons cannot or will not express those needs. Just by being at the person's side and by inquiring about needs, you can be a tremendous source of comfort and aid.

... **having a calm but concerned manner.** Actions speak louder than words and your calm but concerned tone of voice and manner will have a greater effect than empty words.

... **letting the person affected by the disaster talk about the disaster.** One of the best things you can do for a person is to listen to him or her talk about the disaster. You can also talk to children about their drawings and play-acting. Talking, drawing, and play-acting are the person's way of working through his or her reactions.

... helping the person think more clearly. Because you are less caught up in the situation, you may be seeing it more objectively. You may also have some useful information to give. Your advice and suggestions can be helpful to someone, but whenever possible, just hear the person out. *Try not to give advice and then only when asked.* Help them think clearly and arrive at their own solutions. Just by listening you can often help someone think through a problem on his or her own.

... reassuring the person affected by the disaster. You can reassure the person that he or she is now safe and that there is nothing wrong with someone experiencing these reactions. The person is not going crazy. These feelings are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.

... encourage the person to talk about feelings. Many people believe that they are the only one feeling this way or that they are just feeling sorry for themselves especially when they talk about their reactions of fear, frustration, and grief. Someone may need your encouragement to see that it is important to face and deal with these feelings - the sooner the better.

... preparing for future events similar to those prior to the disaster. If you start now, you can prevent the upsetting reactions that can occur in future events. You can tell the person what to expect and discuss what to do to handle the situation.

... taking care of yourself. You are having reactions also! If the disaster occurred in your community, your reactions may be just as strong as those of people who are counting on you to help. For already overworked pastors, physicians, and other care givers, the sense of being overwhelmed by the needs of others may lead to stages of denial and misdirected anger, just as it can and does in the persons directly affected by the disaster. So be sure to take some time for you, and to talk about your own feelings and needs with people who can offer your support and help.

For additional help and support contact:

Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota
Lutheran Disaster Response
P.O. Box 389 Fargo, ND 58107
(800) 950-2901

You can offer
Emotional First Aid
In times of disaster



Lutheran
Social Services
of North Dakota

*“Guided by God’s love and grace,
Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota
brings healing, help and hope.”*